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ABSTRACT

The Latino population of the United States has grown dramatically in recent years, but Latino postsecondary participation and graduation rates have not increased. In 1998, only 7 percent of Mexican Americans (11 percent of all Latinos) held college degrees, versus 25 percent of the total U.S. population. This digest reviews the research on institutional and other factors that may influence the postsecondary success of Latino students. First, Latino high school students have lower academic achievement and graduation rates than do Whites or Blacks. Academic and social support at the secondary level can boost Latino college attendance. Second, the academic and social climate in higher education institutions can support or hinder academic success for Mexican American and other Latino students. Inclusive institutional climates that help students retain their cultural identity while developing a sense of belonging improve students' chances of persisting through college. Third, student financial aid programs positively influence college participation and completion rates, especially among low-income underrepresented groups. Finally, Latino students often lack the information necessary to consider postsecondary participation. Access to information about admissions, financial aid, preparation for entrance exams, services, and other resources can increase Latino participation. (Contains 26 references.) (SV)

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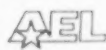
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Mexican Americans and Other Latinos in Postsecondary Education: Institutional Influences

Carlos Nevarez

The increasing Latino population in the United States, and in particular the western states, calls for a response from postsecondary institutions to increase participation and graduation outcomes of Mexican American and other Latino students. The Latino population has grown dramatically in recent years, now comprising 12.5 percent of the total U.S. population, with Mexican Americans making up 58 percent of all Latinos (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). Unfortunately, this increase is not evident in the proportional representation of Mexican Americans and other Latinos in postsecondary education.

In 1998, while the White, non-Latino college participation rate was 67.3 percent, the calculated rate for Latinos was 47.5 percent, the lowest rate since 1990 (Postsecondary Education Opportunity, 1999). More than half of Latino undergraduates attend two-year institutions, compared to only one third of White students (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Research has shown that students who attend two-year colleges are less likely to attain a baccalaureate degree (Bernstein & Eaton, 1994). In 1998 Latinos represented 9.6 percent of undergraduate students and 5.4 percent of graduate students (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

Current and past education policy approaches to increasing postsecondary access, while able to increase enrollments incrementally, have been largely ineffective in addressing issues of persistence and degree attainment. According to Ruppert (1997), "Under such policies, postsecondary enrollments have increased overall; yet the rate of progress for certain groups has been uneven and the 'gap' between rates of enrollment and rates of completion remains stubbornly wide" (p. 8). In 1998 the percentages of all degrees conferred by colleges and universities that were received by Latino students were as follows: associate degree—7.7 percent; bachelor's—5.5 percent; master's—4.1 percent; doctorate—3.2 percent; and first-professional—4.6 percent (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2001a). In all, only about 7 percent of Mexican Americans (11 percent of Latinos) over the age of 25 hold college or graduate degrees, compared to 25 percent of the total population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

Clearly, Mexican Americans and other Latinos in postsecondary education have not been keeping pace proportionate with their growth in numbers among the general population. The research literature provides clues about institutional and other factors that may facilitate or hamper the academic success of Latinos. This Digest focuses on factors that could be addressed by secondary and postsecondary institutions: (a) secondary school preparation, (b) postsecondary institutional climate, (c) financial aid and tuition, and (d) access to information.

Secondary School Preparation

Before Mexican Americans and other Latinos reach the milestone of high school graduation, many leave school. Between 1980 and 1999, the percentage of Blacks age 25 and over with a high school diploma increased by 25.8 percent (to 77 percent); the increase for Whites was 15.5 percent (to 84.3 percent); but for Latinos, with so much ground to make up, less progress was made: only an increase of 12.1 percent (to 56.1 percent) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

"Minority students do not have the opportunity to learn" in many school districts, explains Adam (1999, p. 23). Documented statistics give credibility to those words: The competency levels in high school for all subjects are lower for Latinos than for Whites. Based on National Assessment of

Educational Progress (NAEP) scores in 1999, Latino 17-year-olds scored lower than their White counterparts in reading, science, and mathematics (NCES, 2001b). However, compared with 1996 scores, Latino students made gains in all three of these areas, while Blacks experienced slight decreases in all three areas and Whites had slight decreases in science and reading.

Studies have shown that the school success of Latinos has been influenced by the following factors across all educational levels: the institutional commitment (of teachers, administrators, staff, and parents) to help Latino students succeed academically (Lucas, Henze, & Donato, 1990; Richardson & de los Santos, 1989); and the presence of faculty role models, mentors, and peer support groups (Abi-nader, 1990; Achor & Morales, 1990; Gandara, 1994; Halcon, 1989). According to one study, K-12 programs that boost college attendance among underrepresented youth employ at least one of six components: counseling, academic enrichment, parental involvement, personal enrichment and social integration, mentoring, and scholarships (NCES, 2001c).

Postsecondary Institutional Climate

The academic and social climate in higher education institutions can support or hinder positive academic outcomes for Mexican American and other Latino students. Because of its influence on learning, persistence, and completion, it is necessary to know the character of an institution's climate, and how Latino students experience it (Tinto, 1997). Underrepresented groups on campuses often experience segregation, discrimination, and cultural incongruence in predominantly White colleges (Fiske, 1988; Gloria & Robinson-Kurpius, 1996). During the past decade, college campuses have struggled with "hate incidents." Between the fall of 1986 and the winter of 1990, the National Institute Against Prejudice and Violence reported that about 20 percent of minority students experienced some form of bias attack during an academic year (Sidel, 1994). In 1999, more than 2,000 "hate crimes," defined as "an offense against persons or property motivated by hate or bias against a victim based on race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sex, disability, or sexual orientation," were reported on campuses across the United States (Office of Postsecondary Education, 2001, p. 10). As a result of noninclusive academic climates, Mexican American and other Latino students are often perplexed by the feeling they must choose between their cultural community and the campus community (Gloria & Pope-Davis, 1997). This incongruence brings about stress that too often results in students doing poorly in their academic work or, even worse, dropping out.

Institutions concerned with improving the social climate and making it more congruent with the lives of Latino students have provided special programs, services, and dedicated physical facilities (e.g., multicultural centers, and tutoring and mentoring centers) to help students retain their sense of cultural identity and move past discomforting experiences of isolation, segregation, and alienation. Once students find a reasonable sense of "belonging," their chances of persisting through college improve. How can institutions better facilitate this sense of belonging? One key way is for institutions to reach proportional racial/ethnic representation (Richardson & de los Santos, 1989).

Financial Aid and Tuition

There is ample evidence that student financial aid programs positively influence college participation and comple-

tion rates. For example, Manski and Wise (1983) calculated that "college enrollment was 20 percent higher in 1979 with the Pell Grant program than it would have been without it" (p. 24). They also found that the "increased rate was primarily because of the enrollment of low-income underrepresented students" (p. 24). The type of financial aid available to students is crucial to retention and completion for underrepresented students. According to Pappas (1992) the chances of finishing school decrease if a student relies on loans, savings, or personal assets to finance their education.

Another related problem is tuition increases, which hinder access for Mexican American and other Latino students especially because the Latino population has a lower median per capita income (\$19,833) than either Whites (\$29,606) or Blacks (\$21,662) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). Kane (1995) conducted an empirical study and found that a \$1,000 increase in tuition at public community colleges caused a 6 percent drop in undergraduate enrollment.

Access to Information

The fundamental mission of the university is to conduct research and transmit information to its students and citizens. That this transmission of information happens for Mexican Americans and other Latinos is questionable. Latino students often lack substantial information to even consider participating in postsecondary institutions, even when they have the credentials to be considered. Access to and information about admissions, financial aid, preparation for entrance exams, employment opportunities, services, and available resources can increase participation and graduation outcomes for Latinos.

As a group, college-qualified Latino students are significantly less likely than other college-qualified students to have the information necessary to participate in postsecondary institutions (Carnevale, 1999). One study found that Latino students who did take a college entrance exam and applied to a four-year school had participation levels equal to those of college-qualified non-Latino Whites (NCES, 1997). According to Carnevale (1999), high school graduates whose parents have low levels of income and education—as is the case for many Latino families—could attend four-year colleges at the same rates as students from middle-income families if they took three basic steps: (1) got at least a minimal academic preparation, (2) took an entrance exam, and (3) submitted an application for admission.

Recommendations

What is needed to overcome inadequate Mexican American/Latino participation and graduation in postsecondary institutions is not mysterious. Successfully increasing academic outcomes for these students will require postsecondary institutions to dedicate themselves to the following targeted strategies:

- initiating partnerships with secondary schools to determine areas of needed improvement and implement changes in public education offered to Latino students.
- studying the academic and social climates and conditions of secondary and postsecondary institutions.
- reporting their study findings to governing bodies of institutions; city, state, and federal government officials; community leaders; the community at large; and Latino parents.
- creating and supporting financial aid packages that promote academic success among Latino students.
- working with secondary schools to provide critical information to Latino families and students related to admissions, financial aid, preparation for entrance exams, services, and employment opportunities.

Although postsecondary institutions have not previously succeeded in improving equity outcomes for Mexican American and other Latino students (at least, not in proportion to their growing presence in our society), they have the potential to do so.

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